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THE MINISTER AND THE BOY

IV. THE MODERN CITY AND THE NORMAL BOY¹

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The scope of this article is limited by the following subjects, which will be subsequently treated, viz., the Ethical Value of Organized Play, the Boy's Choice of a Vocation, the Organization of Church Boys' Clubs, and the Boy's Religious Life. What is said therefore on the relation of the church to the city boy is of a general character, the details of organization for boys' work being reserved for later treatment. Also the problems arising from child labor with its vocational misfit and failure, and the intensive consideration of the process and program of the boy's religious life must be withheld as constituting separate and contributory studies in themselves.

Modern cities have been built to concentrate industrial opportunity. They have taken their rise and form subsequent to the industrial revolution wrought by steam and as a result of that revolution. So far they have paid only minor attention to the conservation or improvement of human life. Justice, not to mention mercy, toward the family and the individual has not been the guiding star. The human element has been left to fit as best it could into a system of maximum production at minimum cost, rapid and profitable transportation, distribution calculated to emphasize and exploit need, and satisfactory dividends on what was often suppositious stock; and because these have been the main considerations the latent and priceless wealth of boyhood has been largely sacrificed.

The amazing and as yet unchecked movement of population toward the city means usually a curtailment of living area for all concerned. The more people per acre the greater the limitation

¹ Books recommended: Jane Addams, *The Spirit of Youth and the City Streets*, Macmillan; D. F. Wilcox, *Great American Cities*, Macmillan.

of individual action and the greater the need of self-control and social supervision. Restrictions of all sorts are necessary for the peace of a community wherein the physical conditions almost force people to jostle and irritate one another. In such a situation the more spontaneous and unconventional the expression of life the greater the danger of bothering one's neighbors and of conflicting with necessary but artificial restrictions. Even innocent failure to comprehend the situation may constitute one antisocial or delinquent, and the foreigner as well as the boy is often misjudged in this way.

But on the score of the city's inevitable "Thou shalt not" it is the boy who suffers more than any other member of the community. His intensely motor propensities, love of adventure, dim idea of modern property rights, and the readiness with which he merges into the stimulating and mischief-loving "gang" operate to constitute him the peerless nuisance of the congested district, the scourge of an exasperated and neurasthenic public, the enemy of good order and private rights. Hence juvenile delinquency and crime increase proportionately with the crowding of the modern city, the boy offending five times to the girl's once, and directing 80 per cent of his misdemeanors against property rights. In the city of Chicago alone the 1909 records show that in one year there passed through the courts 3,870 children under seventeen years of age, 10,449 under twenty years, and 25,580 under twenty-five years of age. But it is not the actual delinquency of which the law takes account that most impresses one; it is rather the weight of failure and mediocrity, the host of "seconds" and "culls" that the city treatment of childhood produces.

The constrictions, vicissitudes, and instability of city life often make such havoc of the home that the boy is practically adrift at an early age. He has no abiding-place of sufficient permanency to create a wealth of association or to develop those loyalties that enrich the years and serve as anchorage in the storms of life. He moves from one flat to another every year, and in many cases every six months. In such a kaleidoscopic experience the true old-fashioned neighbor, whose charitable judgment formerly robbed the law of its victims, is sadly missed. Formerly allowance was made

out of neighborly regard for the parents of bothersome boys, but among the flat-dwellers of today proximity means alienation, familiarity breeds contempt, and, far from being neighbors, those who live across the hall or above or below are aggrieved persons who have to put up with the noise of an unknown rascal whose parents like themselves occupy temporarily these restricted quarters—these homes attenuated beyond recognition.

A garden plot, small live stock, pets, woodpile, and workshop are all out of the question, for the city has deprived the average boy not only of fit living quarters but of the opportunity to enact a fair part of his glorious life-drama within the friendly atmosphere of home. He cannot collect things with a view to proprietorship and construction and have them under his own roof. The noise and litter incident to building operations of such proportion as please boys will not be tolerated. Moreover, this home, which has reached the vanishing point, makes almost no demand for his co-operation in its maintenance. There are no chores for the flat boy wherein he may be busy and dignified as a partner in the family life. To make the flat a little more sumptuous and call it an apartment does not solve the problem, and with the rapid decrease of detached houses and the occupation of the territory with flat buildings the city is providing for itself a much more serious juvenile problem than it now has.

But the industrial usurpation takes toll of the family in other ways. The intense economic struggle and the long distance "to work" rob the boy of the father's presence and throw upon the mother an unjust burden. To return home late and exhausted, to be hardly equal to the economic demand, to see the prenuptial ideals fade, to pass from disappointment to discouragement and from chronic irritability to a broken home is not uncommon. The boy is unfortunate if the "incompatibility" end in desertion or divorce, and equally unfortunate if it does not.

Owing to the fact that the male usually stands from under when the home is about to collapse, and to the further fact that industrial accidents, diseases, and fatalities in the city claim many fathers, there frequently falls upon the mother the undivided burden of a considerable family. If she goes out to work the children are

neglected; if she takes roomers family life of the kind that nurtures health and morality is at an end. And just as the apparently fortunate boy of the apartment is forced upon the street, so the boy from the overcrowded old-fashioned house is pushed out by the roomers who must have first attention because of bread-and-butter considerations. Much more could be said of all the various kinds of neglect, misfortune, and avarice that commit boys to the doubtful influences of the city street, but the main object is to point out the trend of home life in the modern city without denying that there are indeed many adequate homes still to be found, especially in suburban districts.

A survey of the street and its allied institutions will throw light upon the precocious ways of the typical city boy. The street is the playground, especially of the small boy who must remain within sight and call of home. Numerous fatalities, vigorous police, and big recreation parks will not prevent the instinctive use of the nearest available open area. If congestion is to be permitted and numerous small parks cannot be had, then the street must have such care and its play zones must be so guarded and supervised that the children will be both safe from danger and healthfully and vigorously employed.

In the busier parts of the city the constant street noise puts a nervous tax upon the children; the proximity of so many bright and moving objects taxes the eyes; the splash of gaudy and gross advertisements creates a fevered imagination; slang, profanity, and vulgarity lend a smart effect; the merchant's tempting display often leads to theft, and the immodest dress of women produces an evil effect upon the mind of the overstimulated adolescent boy; opportunities to elude observation and to deceive one's parents abound; social control weakens; ideals become neurotic, flashy, distorted; the light and allurements of the street encourage late hours; the posters and "barkers" of cheap shows often appeal to illicit curiosity, and the galaxy of apparent fun and adventure is such as to tax to the full the wholesome and restraining influence of even the best home.

The cheap show is an adjunct of the street and a potent educational factor in the training of the city lad. These motion-picture

shows have an estimated daily patronage in the United States of two and a quarter millions, and in Chicago 32,000 children will be found in them daily. Many of these children are helplessly open to suggestion, owing to malnutrition and the nervous strain which the city imposes; and harmful impressions received in this vivid way late at night cannot be resisted. At one time, after a set of pictures had been given on the West Side which depicted the hero as a burglar, thirteen boys were brought into court, all of whom had in their possession house-breakers' tools, and all stated they had invested in these tools because they had seen these pictures and they were anxious to become gentlemanly burglars.² Through censorship bureaus, national and municipal, the character of the films put on exhibition is being greatly improved, and this modern agency of education is destined to a large use by educational and religious agencies. As to the vaudeville, the less said the better, and the music usually speaks for itself.

The social hunger, also, turning its back upon the meager home and heightened by the monotony and semi-independence of early toil, takes to the street. The quest is quickly commercialized and debauched by the public dance halls which are controlled by the liquor interests. A recent thorough investigation of 328 of these halls in Chicago showed a nightly attendance of some 86,000 young people, the average age of the boys being sixteen to eighteen years, and of the girls fourteen to sixteen years. Liquor was sold in 240 halls, 190 had a saloon opening into them, in 178 immoral dancing went on unhindered. The worst halls had the least dancing and the longest intermissions. Everything was conducted so as to increase the sale of liquor, and between the hours of one and three A.M. the toughest element from the saloons, which close at 1:00 o'clock, poured into the halls to complete the debauch and to make full use of the special liquor license which is good until the later hour.³

Did space permit, this same quest of fun and social adventure could be traced through other commercialized channels in public

² See monograph on *Five- and Ten-Cent Theatres* by Louise de Koven Bowen, The Juvenile Protective Association of Chicago.

³ See monograph, *A Study of Public Dance Halls*, by Louise de Koven Bowen, The Juvenile Protective Association of Chicago.

poolrooms and great amusement parks, on excursion boats, and in many ways that lead from the inadequate home to sorrow and disaster. It is to be doubted whether the average pastor or parent has an adequate conception of the tremendous odds against which the moral forces contend for the conservation of the city's childhood and youth, or that we have as yet begun to solve the problems that arise from the city's sinister treatment of the home. Public parks, field-houses, libraries, and social settlements graciously mitigate the evil, but are far from curing it.

To turn to the public schools with the expectation that they can immediately, or at length, make good the injury done the home by industrial usurpation is to expect more than is fair or possible. They are doing valiantly and well, they are becoming social centers, and in due time they will have more adequately in hand both the vocational and recreational interests of youth. With this accession of educational territory will come a proportionate increase in the number of male teachers, and a diminution of the fallacy that the only kind of order is silence and the prime condition of mental concentration inaction. The system will become less and the boy more important.

But the whole community is the master educator; the best home is not exempt from its influence nor the best school greatly superior to its morality. In fact the school, even as the place of amusement and all places of congregation, serves to diffuse the moral problems of boyhood throughout the whole mass. Moral sanitation is more difficult than physical sanitation, and the spoiled boy is a good conductor of various forms of moral virus. The moral training involved in the ordinary working of the public school is considerable and is none the less valuable because it is indirect. With more attention to physical condition, corrective exercise, and organized play, and with the motivating of a larger area of school work, the moral value of the institution will be still further enhanced.

The church addresses itself to the problem in ways both general and specific, positive and negative. In its stimulation of public conscience, in its inspiration of those who work directly for improved conditions, and in Sunday school and young people's society, a contribution of no small value is continually made. A rather

negative or, at best, concessive attitude toward recreation and a disposition to rest satisfied with the denunciation of harmful institutions and activities militates against her greatest usefulness. She must rather compensate for the home shortages and compete with the doubtful allurements of the city. This she may do in part within her own plant and in part by encouraging and supporting all wholesome outlets for the athletic zest, social adventure, worthy ambition, and vocational quest of youth. Those segments of the church which believe in bringing every legitimate human interest within the scope and sanction of religion will in the nature of things offer a more immediate and telling competition to the harmful devices of the city.

But with the exception of a few boys' clubs and scout patrols, for whose direction there is always a shameful shortage of willing and able lay leadership, the church has not as yet grasped the problem; and this remains true when one grants further the value of organized boys' classes in the Sunday school and of the "socials" and parties of young people's societies. To be sure, the Protestant church, expressing itself through the Young Men's Christian Association, has laid hold of the more respectable edge of the problem. But with few exceptions this work is not as yet missionary, militant, or diffused to the communities of greatest need. A few experiments are now being made, but probably the Y.M.C.A., more than the individual church, is under the necessity of treating the underlying economic evils with a very safe degree of caution; and in both there is the ever-recurrent need of an unsparing analysis of motive for the purpose of ascertaining which, after all, is paramount—human welfare or institutional glory.

The tendency ever is to cultivate profitable and self-supporting fields and sound business policies. But the case of thousands upon thousands of boys living in localities that are socially impoverished, unfortunate, and debasing constitutes a call to the missionary spirit and method. If the impulse which is so ready and generous in the exportation of religion and so wise in adaptation to the interests and abilities of the foreign group could but lay hold of our most difficult communities with like devotion and with scientific care there would be developed in due time advanced and adequate

methods, which in turn would take their rightful place as a part of civic or educational administration. As is illustrated in both education and philanthropy, the function of the church in social development has been of this order, and the mistake of short-sighted religious leaders has been to consider these children no longer theirs when once they have been incorporated in the civil structure. The pastoral spirit of the new era claims again the entire parish, however organized, and guards its children still. The pioneer is needed at home just as he is needed abroad, and the pioneering agency must have the same zeal and freedom in order to mark out the way of salvation for hordes of wild city boys who are the menacing product of blind economic haste.

The church should see this big problem and accept the challenge. Society should awaken to the fact that in our large cities there is growing up a generation of boys who morally "cannot discern between their right hand and their left hand"—this through no fault of theirs, for they are but a product. If they are unlovely, "smart," sophisticated, ungrateful, and predatory, what has made them so? Who has inverted the prophetic promise and given them ashes for beauty and the spirit of heaviness for the garment of praise? As matters now stand it is not the ninety and nine who are safe and the one in peril. That ratio tends to be reversed, and will be unless right-minded people accept individually and in their organized relations a just responsibility for the new life that is committed for shaping and destiny to the evolving modern city.